

What is Claimed is:

1. A method for distributing, exchanging and utilizing electronic collectibles as herein described with reference to accompanying drawings, the method comprising:

- (a) storing or holding a registry of one or more electronic collectible items within a collectibles apparatus;
- (b) collectors of electronic collectibles registering as registered collectors within the collectibles apparatus;
- (c) registered collectors being registered as the owners of one or more electronic collectibles within the collectibles apparatus; and
- (d) registered collectors being able to obtain a client apparatus for the purpose of making use of the electronic collectibles that they have been registered as the owners of within the collectibles apparatus.

2. A method for enhancing the uniqueness of electronic collectibles by creating placeholder templates for use within a client apparatus such that each electronic collectible within a set of electronic collectibles has a specific placeholder within the placeholder template and electronic collectibles obtained by registered collectors can only be viewed and used by collectors on their own computing devices by using a client apparatus installed on the collector's computing device with a matching placeholder template corresponding to the set of electronic collectibles from within which the electronic collectible that the collector wishes to view or use is drawn.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein registering registered collectors as the owners of one or more electronic collectibles within the collectibles apparatus may be facilitated by collectors taking steps to initiate being registered as the owners of one or more electronic collectibles within the collectibles apparatus, such steps including:

- (a) submitting unique token serial numbers to the collectibles apparatus, where a registry of all available unique token serial numbers is stored;
- (b) purchasing electronic collectibles; and
- (c) participating in exchanges of electronic collectibles with other registered collectors through such methods as trades, auctions and sales.

4. The method of claim 1, where registered collectors being able to obtain a client apparatus for the purpose of making use of the electronic collectibles that they have been registered as the owners of within the collectibles apparatus may also include providing the facility to receive and make use of the electronic collectibles in a variety of methods including viewing, listening to and otherwise sensing updateable content attached to electronic collectibles.

5. The method of claim 1, where registered collectors being able to obtain a client apparatus for the purpose of making use of the electronic collectibles that they have been registered as the owners of within the collectibles apparatus may also include providing the facility to make use of the electronic collectibles in a variety of methods including using electronic collectibles to participate in electronic games that complement the particular set of electronic collectibles being collected.

6. The method of claim 1, where registered collectors being able to obtain a client apparatus for the purpose of making use of the electronic collectibles that they have been registered as the owners of within the collectibles apparatus may also include providing the facility to make use of the electronic collectibles in a variety of methods including using electronic collectibles to claim prizes offered by sponsors for the collection of specific sub-sets of a particular set of electronic collectibles.

7. The method of claim 1, where registered collectors being able to obtain a client apparatus for the purpose of making use of the electronic collectibles that they have been registered as the owners of within the collectibles apparatus may also include enabling the trading, selling or otherwise disposing of electronic collectibles among registered collectors through the use of both the client apparatuses and the collectibles apparatus together or solely through the use of the collectibles apparatus.

8. The method of claim 3, wherein registering registered collectors as the owners of one or more electronic collectibles within the collectibles apparatus may be facilitated by submitting unique token serial numbers to the collectibles apparatus, where a registry of all available unique token serial numbers is stored, may in turn be facilitated by distributing unique token serial numbers to collectors of electronic collectibles.

9. The method of claim 8, wherein token serial numbers distributed to collectors may be created using a variety of methods including being created using an algorithm such that the token serial numbers are randomly generated alphanumeric strings more than approximately six characters in length with the option of using various predefined syntaxes of the alphanumeric string to indicate certain classes of electronic collectibles.

10. The method of claim 8, wherein token serial numbers may be created using a variety of methods including being created in accordance with an algorithm that ensures random dispersal of the token serial numbers within the range of all possible permutations of the token serial numbers available with a defined syntax of the token serial numbers.

11. The method of claim 8, wherein token serial numbers may be created using a variety of methods including being created such that any two or more token serial numbers will be sufficiently different from one another as to not enable a person to easily guess another token serial number by knowing one of the token serial numbers.

12. The method of claim 1, wherein the collectors of electronic collectibles registering as registered collectors within the collectibles apparatus are each allocated a unique registration identifier that can be used by the registered collector as a means of identifying the collector when the collector accesses the collectibles apparatus.

13. The method of claim 12, wherein allocation of a unique registration identifier to each registered collector supports the enhancement of the uniqueness of electronic collectibles by enabling the addition of encrypted codes to electronic collectibles and to placeholder templates whereby electronic collectibles are not easily viewed or used by persons other than the registered collector who is the registered owner of the electronic collectible, as recorded within the collectibles apparatus.

14. A method of claim 2, wherein the uniqueness of electronic collectibles may be enhanced by adding encrypted codes to electronic collectibles and to placeholder templates that are obtained by registered collectors such that the electronic collectibles obtained by the collector can only be used by a collector if the encrypted code on the electronic collectible obtained by the collector forms a matching pair with the encrypted

code in the corresponding placeholder for that electronic collectible within the placeholder template within the collector's client apparatus.

15. A method of claim 14 where the uniqueness of electronic collectibles may be enhanced by adding encrypted codes to electronic collectibles and to placeholder templates that are obtained by registered collectors such that the electronic collectibles obtained by the collector can only be used by a collector if the encrypted code on the electronic collectible obtained by the collector forms a matching pair with the encrypted code in the corresponding placeholder for that electronic collectible within the placeholder template within the collector's client apparatus, may further comprise the steps of:

- (a) creating a central collectibles apparatus that all collectors of electronic collectibles must use to register as a registered collector, such apparatus also facilitating the assignment of a unique registration identifier to each collector upon registration and facilitating the cataloguing and registering of the distribution of all electronic collectibles within one or more sets of electronic collectibles;
- (b) creating placeholder templates for each set of electronic collectibles, whereby each item in the electronic collectibles set will have a single corresponding placeholder within the respective placeholder template for that electronic collectibles set;
- (c) distributing placeholder templates only to collectors registered within the collectibles apparatus;
- (d) when distributing placeholder templates to registered collectors, also adding to each placeholder in the distributed placeholder template a unique encrypted code that is related to the collector's registration identifier;
- (e) creating a client apparatus for use by registered collectors that facilitates the receipt and use of electronic collectibles within various electronic collectibles sets through the use of placeholder templates for the respective electronic collectibles sets;
- (f) adding an encrypted code to each electronic collectible distributed to a registered collector such that this code from a matching pair with the corresponding encrypted code in the placeholder in the placeholder template in the collector's client apparatus for the distributed copy of the electronic collectible item; and

- (g) creating a facility within the client apparatus whereby electronic collectibles are only usable if the encrypted code on the electronic collectible is a matching pair with the corresponding encrypted code in the placeholder in the placeholder template for that electronic collectible item.

16. A method of claim 2, wherein the uniqueness of electronic collectibles may further be enhanced by the collectibles apparatus also conducting an automated audit of the electronic collectibles within the collector's client apparatus when registered collectors access the collectibles apparatus, which may lead to unauthorized copies of electronic collectibles being deleted from the client apparatus or other such penalties.

17. A method of claim 2, wherein the uniqueness of electronic collectibles may further be enhanced by adding a pairing of unique encryption codes to each collector's client apparatus and each placeholder template that each collector receives from the collectibles apparatus, such that a particular placeholder template can only be used within a particular collector's client apparatus.

18. An apparatus that facilitates distributing, trading and utilizing electronic collectibles as herein described with reference to accompanying drawings, the apparatus comprising:

- (a) a collectibles apparatus environment for managing the ownership and use of electronic collectibles by collectors; and
- (b) a client apparatus environment for making use of the electronic collectibles, with versions for use on a variety of computing devices, including a main computing device, such as a desk top computer, and a hand held computing device.

19. The apparatus of claim 18, where the collectibles apparatus environment may further comprises:

- (a) an electronic collectibles allocation and purchase apparatus that facilitates the registration of registered collectors' ownership of electronic collectibles;

- (b) a collectors registration and administration apparatus that facilitates the registration of collectors and the provision of client apparatuses and placeholder templates to collectors; and
- (c) an apparatus for storing electronic collectibles.

20. The apparatus of claim 18, where the collectibles apparatus environment may further comprise one or more of the following elements:

- (a) a token serial number generation apparatus that uses a pre-defined algorithm to created token serial numbers that can be used to facilitate the distribution of electronic collectibles and to ensure that no two token serial numbers are the same;
- (b) an electronic collectibles trading and auction apparatus that facilitates the transfer of ownership of electronic collectibles between registered collectors through methods such as trades, auctions and sales;
- (c) a sponsorship and prizes apparatus that facilitates the provision of prizes to registered collectors for collecting specific sub-sets within a set of electronic collectibles; and
- (d) an online client management apparatus that provides similar facilities as the client management apparatus within the client apparatus environment, but which is accessible from within the collectibles apparatus without the requirement for the registered collector to have the client apparatus environment installed on their own computing device.

21. The apparatus of claim 20, wherein the token serial number generation apparatus can use a variety of methods to create token serial numbers, including using a pre-defined algorithm to created token serial numbers which are:

- (a) randomly generated alphanumeric strings more than approximately six characters in length; and
- (b) unique, in that no two token serial numbers are the same.

22. The apparatus of claim 20, wherein the token serial number generation apparatus stores a record in the token serial numbers database when each token serial number is created.

23. The apparatus of claim 19, wherein the collectors registration and administration apparatus that facilitates the registration of collectors and the provision of client apparatuses and placeholder templates to collectors may also perform one or more of the following functions:

- (a) providing a facility for collectors to register as registered collectors and be allocated in return a unique registration identifier by the collectibles apparatus;
- (b) maintaining a database of all registered collectors; and
- (c) facilitating the transfer of ownership of electronic collectibles between registered users by updating ownership details within the database of all registered collectors.

24. The apparatus of claim 19, wherein the electronic collectibles allocation and purchase apparatus may also perform one or more of the following functions:

- (a) maintaining a database of all electronic collectibles available within each set of electronic collectibles and the content associated with each electronic collectible;
- (b) updating the database of all registered collectors with information about which electronic collectibles each registered collector owns;
- (c) creating placeholder templates for each set of electronic collectibles, whereby each item in the electronic collectibles set will have a single corresponding placeholder within the respective placeholder template for that electronic collectibles set;
- (d) distributing placeholder templates only to registered collectors;
- (e) when distributing placeholder templates to registered collectors, adding a unique encrypted code to each placeholder in each distributed placeholder template such that each code will form a unique matching pair with the unique encryption code attached to the respective electronic collectible for each placeholder;
- (f) adding an encryption code to each copy of an electronic collectible and its associated content distributed to a registered collector such that this code is a matching pair to the corresponding encrypted code in the placeholder for the respective electronic collectible in the placeholder template in the

collector's client apparatus environment for the distributed electronic collectible;

- (g) adding a hidden encrypted code to client apparatus environments provided to registered collectors such that this code can be used to facilitate the matching of pairs of encrypted codes applied to electronic collectibles and their respective placeholders within placeholder templates; and
- (h) facilitating the transfer of ownership of electronic collectibles between registered users by updating ownership details within the database of all registered collectors.

25. The apparatus of claim 19, wherein the electronic collectibles allocation and purchase apparatus may also perform one or more of the following functions:

- (a) receipt of token serial numbers submitted by registered collectors for the purpose of registered collectors in return being registered as the owners of an electronic collectible;
- (b) recording of the details of the submitted token serial number in the collectibles apparatus such that the submitted token serial number will be invalidated for future use;
- (c) distributing to each registered collector's client apparatus environment updates of copies of content associated with electronic collectibles owned by the collector; and
- (d) conducting automated audit checks of registered collector's client apparatus environments for copies of electronic collectibles that the collector does not own and instigating actions, such as the automated removal of a copy of an electronic collectible that is not owned by the collector, if a copy of an electronic collectible that is not owned by the collector is found during the audit check.

26. The apparatus of claim 20, where the electronic collectibles allocation and purchase apparatus may also perform the function of facilitating the transfer of ownership of electronic collectibles between registered users by updating ownership details within the database of all registered collectors may also include the function of removing copies of electronic collectibles and their associated content held in a registered collector's client apparatus environment by previous owners of electronic collectibles.

27. The apparatus of claim 20, wherein the sponsorship and prizes apparatus that facilitates the provision of prizes to registered collectors for collecting specific subsets within a set of electronic collectibles may also perform one or more of the following functions:

- (a) either automatically or upon request by a registered collector, validating and processing a claim for a prize when a collector has collected the requisite electronic trading cards to claim a prize;
- (b) upon validation of a collector's claim for a prize, indicating which of the collector's electronic collectibles had been used to claim the prize such that those electronic collectibles can not be used to claim further prizes; and
- (c) maintaining a database of how many of each type of prize are available and which prizes have been claimed, thereby enabling collectors to periodically check which prizes were still available for claiming.

28. The apparatus of claim 18, where the client apparatus environment further comprises one or more of the following elements:

- (a) a client management apparatus through which collectors can view and utilise their electronic collectibles;
- (b) one or more placeholder templates for; and
- (c) a database for storing electronic collectibles and their associated content.

29. The apparatus of claim 28 wherein the client management apparatus may also facilitate one or more of the following functions:

- (a) enabling input of information by the collector;
- (b) providing an interface through which data can be exchanged via the internet between the client apparatus environment and the collectibles apparatus environment; and
- (c) enabling the use of electronic collectibles in complementary environments, such as electronic games, exhibitions of electronic collectibles and exchanges of electronic collectibles.

30. The apparatus of claim 28 wherein the client management apparatus may also perform one or more of the following functions:

- (a) the management of placeholder templates, such that the appropriate placeholder template is used to facilitate the various usages of electronic collectibles; and
- (b) checking that the encrypted code on an electronic collectible from a matching pair with the encrypted code for that electronic collectible's placeholder within the placeholder template when the client management apparatus receives copies of electronic collectibles and only enabling use or viewing of the electronic collectibles if there is a match between these two encrypted codes.

31. The apparatus of claim 18, where there may be multiple forms of the version of the client apparatus environment, such as a main form, a client apparatus environment (main), for use on a main computing device, such as a desk-top computer, and a hand held form, client apparatus environment (hand held computing device) for use on portable handheld computing devices, such as personal digital assistants.

32. The apparatus of claim 18, where the client apparatus environment may further comprise a client import and export apparatus to facilitate the exchange of data between multiple forms of the client apparatus environment used by the one registered collector, such as a client apparatus environment (main) and a client apparatus environment (hand held computing device), thereby enabling the data in the two client apparatus environments to be periodically synchronized.

33. The apparatus of claim 28 wherein the client management apparatus when used within a client apparatus environment (hand held computing device) may also perform one or more of the following functions:

- (a) receiving copies of placeholder templates from the client apparatus environment (main); and
- (b) containing an encrypted unique identifier code such that only one copy of the client apparatus environment (hand held computing device) can exchange data with one copy of the client apparatus environment (main).

34. The apparatus of claim 18, where the client apparatus environment, when the client apparatus environment is of the form of a client apparatus environment (hand held computing device), may further comprise a direct wireless trading apparatus that facilitates two or more hand held computing devices used by registered collectors with the client apparatus environment (hand held computing device) installed on these devices to trade electronic collectibles while not having access to the collectibles apparatus.

35. The apparatus of claim 34, where the direct wireless trading apparatus may facilitate one or more of the following functions:

- (a) facilitating pre-agreed trades of electronic collectibles between two registered collectors to be conducted by enabling the exchange of the terms of the agreed trade, such as the amount of money and the electronic collectibles involved in the trade, directly between the hand held computing devices of the parties to the trade; and
- (b) holding electronic collectibles involved in a trade conducted via the direct wireless trading apparatus in escrow, whereby the electronic collectibles could not be further used or traded by the owner of the electronic collectible, within the client apparatus environments of all parties to such a trade until all parties to the trade had ratified the terms of the trade within the collectibles apparatus.

36. The apparatus of claim 18, where the collectibles apparatus environment for managing the ownership and use of electronic collectibles by collectors may be separated into two apparatuses comprising:

- (a) an encryption device that can be distributed to one or more creators of electronic collectibles for the purpose of enabling the encryption of electronic collectibles and their associated content; and
- (b) the central collectibles apparatus that retains the remaining functions of the collectibles apparatus.

37. The apparatus of claim 36, where the encryption device is able to add an encryption code provided by the central collectibles apparatus to each copy of an electronic collectible and its associated content distributed to a registered collector such that this code is a matching pair to the corresponding encrypted code in the placeholder for the respective electronic collectible in the placeholder template in the collector's client apparatus environment for the distributed electronic collectible.